

## In the News

### Tulare Court Puts Media Savvy to Work

According to a recent article in the *Tulare Advance Register*, the Superior Court of Tulare County says consolidation and unification have enabled it to better distribute cases and cut down on delays.

The article, titled "Courts Claim Easier Access to Justice," appeared in the January 12 edition of the *Register*. It explains that a single judge can now potentially hear both criminal and civil cases and that those cases can be moved to departments able to handle them. The article also mentions that funding for the courts comes from the state, not the county, and that the people working in a court are employees of the court, not the county. In addition, the story describes recent improvements to the Tulare court, its law library, and its free paralegal services.

The Tulare court's positive media relations were responsible, in part, for the article. Judge Paul Vortmann served as the

main source of information for the reporter and is quoted several times in the story. According to Judge Vortmann, when he was appointed to the bench three years ago, different judges would speak to the media on issues involving the court.

"The public should understand the court system—it should not be a mystery," says Judge Vortmann. "I suggested that we have one media spokesperson, and I was nominated. I never promise to have the answer the reporter is looking for, but I will always return the call promptly."

Judge Vortmann returned *Court News's* call the same day.

Other court-related events in the news:

**"Court Sets Up Question Center,"** *Mercury News* (San Jose), January 15, 2002;  
**"County Court Unveils New Center,"** *Palo Alto Daily News*, January 15, 2002



A recent story in the *Tulare Advance Register* described improvements at the Tulare courthouse.

Announced the opening of the Superior Court of Santa Clara County's self-service center for those who need assistance in navigating the legal process.

**"S.J. Court Interpreters Help Bridge Communication Gap,"** *Record* (Stockton), December 16, 2001

Reported on the Superior Court of San Joaquin County's use of sign language interpreters to translate court proceedings for hearing-impaired litigants.

**"Check the Web for Jury Duty,"** *Union* (Grass Valley), December 12, 2001

Described the Superior Court of Nevada County's upgraded jury duty information system, which allows potential jurors to find out about their

scheduled service through the court's Web site.

**"County Courts Go High-Tech Dealing With Documents,"** *Ventura County Star*, December 10, 2001

Detailed the new, computerized document presentation system that is available in 19 courtrooms in Ventura and Simi Valley.

**"Courthouse Jury Procedure Changed,"** *Argonaut* (Marina Del Rey), December 6, 2001

Described the Superior Court of Los Angeles County's conversion to a one-day/one-trial jury selection system at its Santa Monica and West Los Angeles courthouses. ■

## Partnership Opens Door to Public Law Center

Collaboration works. Formed through a partnership with the county law library, the Superior Court of Nevada County's Public Law Center has added itself to the growing list of legal self-help centers in the state. According to court officials, it is one of the first few such centers to open in the rural counties of Northern California.

"The center is part of a public outreach project undertaken by the court and the law library to improve access for members of the community, particularly self-represented litigants," says Paula Carli, the court's executive officer. "Use of the center has been growing steadily since the program started."

Originally conceived in the fall of 1999, the center in its cur-

rent form has been in operation since March 2001. Its director, Kent VanderSchuit, along with two legal assistants, Joan Connelley and Lu Mellado, staff both the center and the law library. They provide information in the forms of books, videos, brochures, and face-to-face personal consultations on topics such as civil actions, appeals, adoptions, conservatorships, guardianships, juvenile justice, jury service, probate, and traffic matters.

The Public Law Center also provides and advertises free classes and seminars on a variety of legal topics. The classes are videotaped and made available to both center visitors and court staff members. The center has even used the court's videoconferencing equipment to broadcast the classes to other court locations in Nevada and Sierra Counties.

#### DEVELOPMENT

Although Nevada County's Public Law Center is not the only self-help center in California providing this kind of information, it does offer a working model of a small county finding the resources to deliver such services to the public.

"It made so much sense to place the center inside the law library where resources and legal research materials could be shared and more easily accessed," says Ms. Carli. "At the time, the law library was used primarily for storage and as a place for attorneys to talk with

their clients. Book subscriptions were not current, many volumes were lost or stolen, and there was no part-time or full-time staff to assist patrons. Most people couldn't even find the library because it was on the second floor. Fortunately, the local bar association and a few public citizens had taken a renewed interest in improving the situation. So it was time for 'Let's make a deal.'"

The court approached the Board of Trustees of the Nevada County Law Library and asked them to donate floor space for the center. The court also suggested that the two entities share resources for remodeling and furnishing the space and for providing computers and legal support staff.

The court cooperated with additional county departments to clear space for the center. For instance, to move the law library and self-help center to a more accessible first-floor location, it needed assistance from the district attorney, court reporters, the Department of General Services, and the Nevada County Collection Department, all of whom moved staff members.

At the same time court officials were creating space for the Public Law Center, they were researching how to make it a valuable resource for court patrons. Ms. Carli, along with Presiding Judge M. Kathleen Butz and law librarian Lu Mellado, visited self-help centers in the Superior

Courts of Sacramento, Sutter, and Ventura Counties.

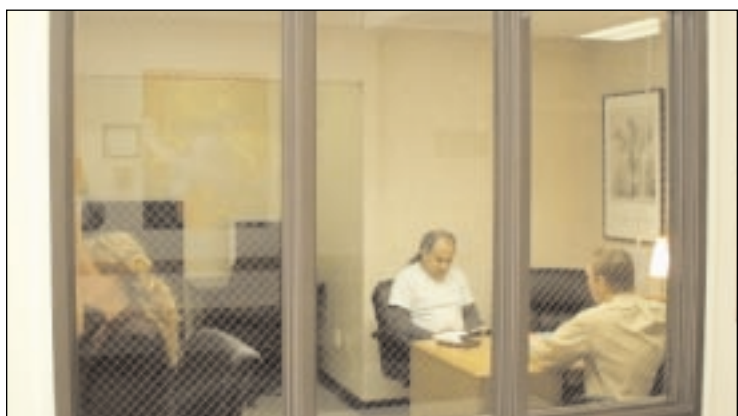
"We already had a successful Family Support Self-Help Center, but we were not able to help people who needed information on small claims, unlawful detainers, civil harassment, appeals, probate, and other areas of the law," says Ms. Carli.

#### EVALUATION

Daily statistics are kept on who is using the center, and for what purposes and which types of cases; these data are regularly communicated to the court's judges and clerks so they can monitor the effectiveness of the services provided and their impacts on court operations. From October 2001 through February 2002, the center averaged 227 visitors per month. Beginning in March, it expanded its services to include advising litigants on small claims actions. Mr. VanderSchuit expects that this additional service will increase the center's visitors to more than 400 per month.

The center asks patrons to provide feedback after they have received assistance. Nearly all center visitors have given positive feedback about their experiences, regardless of whether they eventually won or lost their cases.

"The public's reception of the center has been phenomenal," says Ms. Carli. "We receive many letters and telephone calls every week from litigants praising the service." ■



The Superior Court of Nevada County's Public Law Center provides a working model of a small county that found the resources to deliver self-help services to the public. Kent VanderSchuit (right), director of the Public Law Center, talks with law librarian Lu Mellado in the center's office. Photo: Courtesy of the Superior Court of Nevada County



# Grants Aid Court Projects

Recent grant awards are making it easier for California's superior courts to expand their services to the public, such as by developing bilingual self-help centers and interactive Web sites.

The Judicial Council in January approved the distribution to the courts of nearly \$2 million from the Trial Court Improvement Fund and the Judicial Administration Efficiency and Modernization Fund. The funds were awarded through the 2001-2002 Trial Court Innovation Grant and Community-Focused Court Initiative Grant programs.

**TRIAL COURT INNOVATION GRANTS**

The purpose of the Trial Court Innovation Grants is to encourage courts to develop and test models of court operation, especially those that improve access and efficiency in court administration.

The latest disbursement of grant funds was \$1.257 million

that went to 45 court programs around the state. Projects that received grants include:

- Bilingual court signage;
- Bilingual public service announcements for radio and television;
- Court payments via the Internet;
- Juror payment systems;
- Security equipment;
- Self-help centers; and
- Supervised visitation areas for family law litigants.

Grant recipients are required to submit a final report on their projects to the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC). The report should show how the grant funds were spent, describe the project's accomplishments, detail the products or services provided by consultants, and offer advice to other courts that might seek to replicate the project.

● For more information, contact Lucy Smallsreed, Grants Program Administrator, 415-865-

7705; e-mail: [lucy.smallsreed@jud.ca.gov](mailto:lucy.smallsreed@jud.ca.gov).

**COMMUNITY-FOCUSED COURT INITIATIVE GRANTS**

The Community-Focused Court Initiative Grants are aimed at assisting the courts in community outreach and education. The council approved 16 grant awards, totaling \$622,500, to projects that are innovative, demonstrate the best use of existing court resources, represent collaboration with other courts or justice agencies, showcase a commitment to long-term community involvement, and can be replicated by other courts.

The grants will help fund projects such as:

- Bilingual self-help materials;
  - Curriculum development for high school students;
  - Customer service surveys;
  - Informational court handbooks;
  - Self-help kiosks; and
  - Visitor information booths.
- As with the Trial Court Innovation Grants, courts receiving Community-Focused Court Initiative Grants are required to submit a final report to the AOC describing how grant funds were spent, detailing the products or services provided by consultants, and offering advice to other courts that might seek to replicate the project.
- For more information, contact Jack Urquhart, Research and Planning Unit, 415-865-7654; e-mail: [jack.urquhart@jud.ca.gov](mailto:jack.urquhart@jud.ca.gov). ■

## Take Sacramento's Virtual Courthouse Tour

It's the next best thing to being there.

The Superior Court of Sacramento County invites the public to take a virtual tour of its facilities. By logging on to [www.saccourt.com](http://www.saccourt.com) and taking the Virtual Courthouse Tour, site visitors can familiarize themselves with various court locations and services.

"The primary focus for the virtual court tour was to provide court employees, particularly new employees, a means to get a more comprehensive view of the court and increase their understanding of the organization as a whole," says Millie Luna, the court's training manager. "By educating our employees, we are preparing them to better assist court customers."

The virtual tour, which went live in February, assists users in finding court facilities via interior and exterior photos and maps. Visitors can "walk" through the buildings at each court location and learn about the programs housed there. The tour provides direct links to the court's Web pages where more information can be found. In addition, it includes links to partner agencies such as the sheriff's office, district attorney's office, and Department of Health and Human Services.

**DEVELOPING THE TOUR**

Funded by a grant from the Administrative Office of the Courts, the project has been in development since July. Court staff members first visited and critiqued existing online court

tours from all over the nation. For their own tour they then established a storyboard to help them visualize and plan the details of every page, including text, digital photos, and links.

When the project was nearing completion, it was premiered for a group of new court employees, who filled out a questionnaire before and after the tour to evaluate what they learned from it. The court acquired similar evaluations from the Community-Focused Court Planning Committee and the court's management council.

The court plans to use its online tour in orienting new employees and judicial officers. It will also use the tour as an aid in civics classes, in partnership with the county's schools. An "Ask the Judges" Web site, similar to that already working in Los Angeles County, is the next phase of the project. Students will be able to view the Virtual Courthouse Tour in their classrooms and ask questions online. A judge will then post responses to the site.

● For more information, contact Gerry Root, Public Information Officer, Superior Court of Sacramento County, 916-874-6880. ■



## CountyProfile

### San Bernardino



The main courthouse, located in the city of San Bernardino, was dedicated in 1926.

**Geographic area:** 20,160 square miles in the southeastern portion of California

**Population:** According to the 2000 U.S. Census, the population is 1,709,434. By 2020 the population is expected to grow by approximately 38 percent to 2,747,213.

**Demographics:** Age: 0-19 ≈ 36%; 20-39 ≈ 29%; 40-59 ≈ 24%; 60-79 ≈ 9%; 80+ ≈ 2%

Race/Ethnicity: white ≈ 44%; Hispanic/Latino ≈ 32%; black/African American ≈ 9%; Asian ≈ 4.5%; American Indian/Alaska Native ≈ 1%; Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander ≈ 0.5%; some other race/ethnicity ≈ 4%; two or more races/ethnicities ≈ 5%

**Number of court locations:** 15

**Number of authorized judges:** 63

**Number of court staff:** 839

**Caseload:** Filings for fiscal year 2000-2001 totaled 437,504

**Annual court operating budget:** \$73,439,868 as of January 2002

**Presiding judge:** Roberta McPeters

**Executive officer:** Tressa Sloan Kentner

**Of note:** San Bernardino County is not only the largest county (in square miles) in California but the second largest county in the United States.

*Sources: Superior Court of San Bernardino County; County of San Bernardino; California Department of Finance; U.S. Census Bureau*





# Juvenile Justice Initiatives Yield Surprising Results

According to a recent independent study, California courts are reaping the benefits of a multidisciplinary approach to improving the handling of juvenile justice cases. Many counties around the state have coordinated the efforts of juvenile bench officers, public defenders, district attorneys, probation officers, service providers, educators, and mental health professionals. These courts indicated to researchers that they are already showing decreases in truancy, reductions in out-of-home placements, and better coordination of services.

Coyote Moon Consulting of Alameda conducted the study 10 months after the January 2001 conference "Juvenile Delinquency and the Courts," which was attended by 550 juvenile justice professionals representing 54 of California's 58 counties. The conference was hosted

by the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) and funded by the State Justice Institute. The terms of the conference grant required an independent study to gauge the event's effectiveness.

Coyote Moon's study found that the conference had met its goal of creating local juvenile justice teams with action plans to improve their local systems for handling juvenile cases. Each county participating in the conference sent a team representing key positions in its juvenile justice system. This team approach was based on a model employed by the AOC for statewide coordination and local action in approaching domestic violence. Conference organizers adapted the model for juvenile delinquency issues.

Teams varied from county to county but included a variety of juvenile justice system professionals. The wide range of par-

ticipants allowed each team to benefit from the perspectives of all facets of the juvenile justice system when creating its action plan. This collaboration had an unexpected side effect. With all the key players at the table, service gaps were exposed, which helped the teams focus their efforts and resources and remove any duplication of efforts.

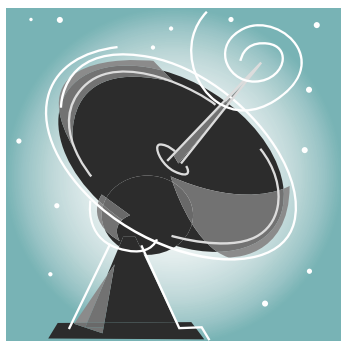
The study revealed a broad spectrum of initial successes. For example, participating counties started new drug and mental health courts, created drug treatment programs, put mentoring programs in place, and restaffed and implemented an early intervention team. In addition, the county teams identified the need for more acute assessment of and sensitivity to the needs of female juveniles. This issue is being addressed through increased staff hiring and training.

The study shows that many

of the county teams continue to meet and work together to improve the service they provide in juvenile justice cases. According to the study, their efforts are already bearing fruit in the forms of decreased truancy, more group home graduates, and reduced out-of-home placements. These advances are attributed to earlier and timelier interventions and the introduction of adult parenting classes.

The county teams will meet again for a reunion conference August 15-16 at the Radisson Hotel-Berkeley Marina. There they will refine their plans and continue to find ways to make a positive difference in the juvenile justice system. Information on the reunion conference will be available in early spring.

● To view the study on the 2001 Juvenile Delinquency and the Courts conference, visit [www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/cfcc/programs/description/delproj.htm](http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/cfcc/programs/description/delproj.htm). For more information, contact Allison Schurman, 415-865-7701; e-mail: [allison.schurman@jud.ca.gov](mailto:allison.schurman@jud.ca.gov). ■



## Distance Learning

*Continued from page 1*

### BROADCAST INFRASTRUCTURE

Thirteen superior courts were able to view the AOC's first satellite broadcast last May. Coincid-

ing with the weekly orientation classes that debuted this spring, all but one of the superior and appellate courts have designated at least one location at which to view the broadcasts; many of the larger counties feature multiple sites. Currently, 123 satellite dishes and 152 training rooms or

sites are available statewide. The AOC has provided the satellite equipment and many of the television carts, large-screen monitors, video projectors, and sound systems that will be used to view the broadcasts.

### ONLINE RESOURCES—COMET

CJER continues to develop new forms of distance education for the judicial branch, including online programs. "Online training represents a different approach to learning that is accessible and self-paced for individual use," explains Ms. Thorson.

CJER's COMET (Court Online Mentoring, Education, and Training) Web site, at [www2.courtinfo.ca.gov/comet](http://www2.courtinfo.ca.gov/comet), serves as a clearinghouse for online education and training resources for court staffs. It includes an online interactive version of the *Basic In-Service Training Manual*; course materials from the Court Clerks' Training Institute; a comprehensive listing of courses and education programs offered by courts throughout the state; a page devoted to the professional development of court trainers; and Web-based courses and tutorials on computer software and professional development. In addition, COMET offers a course developed by CJER on how to handle a changing work environment and by June will provide online classes on fairness and security issues. Courses on ethics, business writing, and office safety are under development.

Online education affords CJER a great ability to adapt and update course curricula. In fact, before officially launching the program, the CJER staff

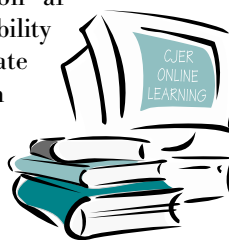
enlisted trial and appellate court staff members to help test the proposed classes. The courses were redesigned to incorporate the testers' suggestions.

Through the COMET site, court personnel are eligible to sign up for the Learn2.com and Syntrio.com online educational programs. Learn2.com's 40 licensed courses and tutorials teach users all aspects of software applications, including Microsoft Word, Access, Outlook, and PowerPoint. Syntrio.com courses are self-directed and cover topics such as time management, listening skills, preventing sexual harassment, and customer service. Serial numbers and passwords are required to view these courses. Individuals designated as CJER contacts in each court distribute the serial numbers and passwords to court staff members and provide feedback about the effectiveness of the programs.

Participants in satellite broadcasts, as well as those taking selected in-person classes, will soon be able to visit the COMET site to download class materials. In this way, online and satellite technologies will work together to enhance educational programs for court staffs.

The AOC plans to expand its distance education programs by creating an infrastructure for educational webcasting and videoconferencing—two more projects that promise a flexible approach to keeping court staffs abreast of the latest practices in judicial administration.

● For more information on CJER's distance education programs, contact Jay Harrell, 415-865-7753; e-mail: [jay.harrell@jud.ca.gov](mailto:jay.harrell@jud.ca.gov). ■



## AOC—TV Guide

*(weekly broadcasts every Tuesday at 9 a.m., beginning March 19)*

**March 19** May I Help You? Legal Advice Versus Legal Information

**March 26** May I Help You? Legal Advice Versus Legal Information

**April 2** Orientation to the Judicial Branch of Government

**April 9** Orientation to the Judicial Council and the AOC

**April 16** May I Help You? Legal Advice Versus Legal Information

**April 23** May I Help You? Legal Advice Versus Legal Information

**April 30** Continuing the Dialogue

**May 7** Orientation to the Judicial Branch of Government

**May 14** Orientation to the Judicial Council and the AOC

**May 21** Training for Supervisors: Ethics

**May 28** Training for Staff: Ethics

**June 4** Orientation to the Judicial Branch of Government

**June 11** Orientation to the Judicial Council and the AOC

**June 18** Training for Supervisors: Fairness

**June 25** Training for Staff: Fairness

**July 2** Orientation to the Judicial Branch of Government

**July 9** Orientation to the Judicial Council and the AOC

**July 16** Training for Supervisors: Preventing Sexual Harassment

**July 23** Training for Staff: Preventing Sexual Harassment

**July 30** Continuing the Dialogue

**August 6** Orientation to the Judicial Branch of Government

**August 13** Orientation to the Judicial Council and the AOC

**August 20** Training for Supervisors: Effective Performance Evaluations

**August 27** Training for Staff: Ethics

**September 3** Orientation to the Judicial Branch of Government

**September 10** Orientation to the Judicial Council and the AOC

**September 17** Training for Supervisors: *To be announced*

**September 24** May I Help You? Legal Advice Versus Legal Information

**October 1** Orientation to the Judicial Branch of Government

**October 8** Orientation to the Judicial Council and the AOC

**October 15** Training for Supervisors: *To be announced*

**October 22** Training for Staff: Fairness

**October 29** Continuing the Dialogue

**November 5** Orientation to the Judicial Branch of Government

**November 12** Orientation to the Judicial Council and the AOC

**November 19** Training for Supervisors: Effective Performance Evaluations

**November 26** Training for Staff: Preventing Sexual Harassment

**December 3** Orientation to the Judicial Branch of Government

**December 10** Orientation to the Judicial Council and the AOC

**December 17, 24, and 31** No broadcasts

